

The USSR Pavilion: A Contradiction of Immense Proportions

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In 1967, Montreal became the temporary home for 90 pavilions, representing over 62 countries and republics from all over the world, gathered thematically under the motto of “a Man and His World”. The exposition attracted more than 50 million visitors, second only to the Paris World Fair in 1900. The Expo 67 witnessed an enormous flow of visitors during its first official opening days in April 1967, resulting in extremely long lineups near pavilions of a most extraordinary architectural design. One of the most popular pavilions, the imposing structure presented by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, drew over 13 million visitors to its doors over the course of just a few months, perhaps due in part to the intrigue of learning more about the details of everyday life in the mysterious Soviet Union, and the desire to see its pavilion first-hand ¹. The structure presented by the Union exuberantly celebrated the conjunction of 16 constituent republics for 50 years since the Russian Revolution ².

The Expo 67 World Fair was the USSR’s chance to present a grand image to the rest of the world, an aim it had been striving to attain for a long while as part of its quest for the title of one of the most powerful countries in the world. Although there were actually several cracks beneath the surface, the Communist Party attempted to project through its pavilion a pristine representation of what it

¹ Brown, Thomas. "Expo 67." The Canadian Encyclopedia. Available from <http://www.encyclopediecanadienne.ca/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=U1ARTU0001158>. Internet; accessed 23 March 2010.

² Kenez, Peter. *A history of the Soviet Union from the beginning to the end*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 57.

considered the outstanding achievements of the Union as an institution by means of innovative design that can be seen in one of the Meredith Dixon's slides (See Figure 1) . However, in the process, they attempted to obscure many of the contradictions and truths of life in the USSR. Failing to clarify the common Western misunderstanding that the USSR amounted to little more than Russia, the USSR did much of the countries involved in the federation a grave disservice. Further, much as they may have tried to hide it, the marks of the USSR's struggle to compete with the United States and the contradictions it entailed, as well as its internal difficulties with political insecurity, social tyranny and cultural repression were unavoidably reflected in their Expo pavilion, giving birth to seeds of doubt about the adequacy of the functioning of the grandest communist project the world has ever seen.

On December 29, 1922, the representatives of the Russian SFSR, the Transcaucasian SFSR, the Ukrainian SSR and the Belorussian SSR came together in order to sign the Treaty and the Declaration of Creation of the USSR. On that day, a new chapter in the supposed joint development of the four united republics began. The size and power of the USSR continued its constant expansion with the addition of new republics, until the 6th of August, 1940, when the Moldavian SSR signed the Treaty of unification with the USSR. Since the prewar years, most of the republics involved in the Union were working with particular persistence in order to propel their unified society to the rank of one of the most developed and powerful countries in the world. While many of them were at different stages of development at the time of unification, most of the republics committed to showing great

dedication to the USSR as an entity ³. The Soviet republics did not know at the time that their various levels of immense contribution to the communist project would not ultimately have significant influence over the ways in which the Party mistreated them subsequently. Sacrificing the chance of personal development for the sake of the advancement of the larger Soviet entity that included them all, the 16 republics signed themselves up for a promising but risky experiment, the outcome of which they likely did not quite foresee.

The concept of an “iron wall” kept the Soviet proletariat from knowing much about other ways of life. The Communist Party made particular efforts to conceal the fact that major powers in the West were leading very different systems of government, with countries such as capitalist America enjoying (at that time) substantial prosperity both at the level of the nation as a whole and that of the individual ⁴. It is possible that the communist society wouldn’t have known the difference between the two if it hadn’t started sensing that there was something wrong in the way it was made to live, particularly in the suppression of much in the way of personal freedoms. Dissent arose at the way the Communist Party was encouraging a suppression of its component republics’ individual identities, and instead, pressuring for the creation of a forced obligation for its nations to contribute to the development of the Union, often for very little personal profit. The

³ "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics." Encyclopedia Britannica. Available from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/614785/Union-of-Soviet-Socialist-Republics>. Internet; accessed 25 March 2010.

⁴ "Iron Curtain." Encyclopedia Britannica. Available from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/294419/Iron-Curtain>. Internet; accessed 25 March 2010.

dialectic of dissent and repression arose in USSR in the mid-1960s, and indeed, these two terms well-describe the image of the bereaved post-Stalin situation that was sweeping the USSR in the mid-20th century. The politics of de-Stalinisation swept the bloc in the 1960s, leaving in its wake cleavage-ridden leadership polities torn between reformism and conservatism. The impulse to post-Stalin reform, especially in the arts, civil rights, and the general quality of life, seeded dissent; conservative reactions to reformist policies ensured its perennial growth and seasonal repression ⁵.

The rumors about this dreary political situation in USSR had started finding their way to the rest of the world, placing substantial pressure on the Union to enhance its dwindling image and reputation worldwide, and restore its constituents' faith in its grand project. The Expo 67 provided just such an opportunity to show the world a brighter side of the USSR. Indeed, the USSR had been preparing for this opportunity for quite some time. In 1958, at the architectural exhibition in Moscow in honor of the exposition's 10th anniversary since the war, Soviet architects as well as Party members openly admitted that, since the beginning of 1960s, Soviet architecture had lost its splendor, its style becoming largely monotonous and out of date. It was agreed that, whereas Soviet architecture had recently been a model for the rest of world, it was time for them to humbly learn more about the latest design trends and techniques emanating from the advancing Western cultures. Aware of

⁵ Sharlet, Robert. "Dissent and Repression in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe: Changing Patterns since Khrushchev" *International Journal* 33. 4 (1968), 763-795, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40201689>. (accessed March 27, 2010), 763.

their fall in the architectural stakes, and with the Communist Party wary of presenting anything less than superiority and perfection of Communist society and its social life to the Western world, the Union gave up the right to hold the World Fair 67, and passed it along to Canada ⁶. Desperately trying to project an image of grandeur and excellence, but painfully aware of its own inadequacy and problems, the Union's first informal admission of weakness in 1958 preceded more obvious signs of insecurity and self-doubt that were clearly visible in some of the excesses it used in building its pavilion at the Expo 67 in Montreal.

Perhaps one of the main reasons for the USSR pavilions contradictory extravagance was its perennial intense competition with the United States. Located on the embankment of the Ile Notre-Dame, the Soviet pavilion was openly participating in an unfriendly contest with its main structural competitor – the Geodesic Dome, representing America, clearly shown on an expressive slide of Meredith Dixon ⁷. “Both pavilions, embodying two of the worlds’ super-powers, flawlessly implemented such innovative design ideas and characteristics as uniformity, lightness, openness and up-to-dateness, all of which were untypical for either of the countries” says Professor David Covo of the McGill School of Architecture ⁸. The newest trends in form-making, adopted by the Party after the

⁶ Kazakova, Olga. "Dissertation." НИИТАГ. Available from <http://www.niitag.ru/info/doc/?242>. Internet; accessed 24 March 2010.

⁷ Figure 2. "USSR & USA Pavilions." *Expo'67 Slide Collection*. Web. 27 Mar 2010. <<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/expo-67/search/slideSearch.php>>.

⁸ David Covo(Professor at the McGill School of Architecture, Montreal), interview by Kateryna Rogynska, March 16, 2010.

refusal to host Expo 67, were surprisingly similar to the main design decisions implemented in the US pavilion. Both of the buildings echoed each other in their large, complex, grid-like structures, their transparency, and the use of expensive steel and glazing. The openness of the spaces around them only added to a subtle uniformity in the World exposition and a huge deal of tension and open strive for the title of “mightiest” between the two largest countries. This open competition between the two powers quite obviously contradicted communist ideologies. Having spent decades trying to convey an image of a man-oriented society, the Union disregarded its mottos about modesty, the prioritization of the worker, and slogans such as “everything for the sake of man”, in order to try and outdo the United States at the Expo 67 by creating as massive and striking a pavilion as possible, again exposing a hint of political insecurity⁹. If the chosen mottos were really something the Party believed in and correspondingly lived by in its treatment of its people, it would have reconsidered a number of unjustifiable design decisions for the pavilion. Not only was the cost of the pavilion exorbitant, but it was clearly not as focused on the benefit of man as it was on giving an impression of magnificence and importance. This is evident, for example, in an investigation of the notion of scale used in the design. It is quite clear that Mikhail Posokhin, the main architect responsible for the design, created a building that did not particularly invite a celebration of people with warmth and friendliness ¹⁰. His design clearly

⁹ Dembling, Paul G.. "The Evolution of the Outer Space Treaty." *JOURNAL OF AIR LAW COMMERCE* 33, no. (1967): 419-456, 421.

¹⁰ Figure 1. "Thailand & USSR Pavilions at Night." *Expo'67 Slide Collection*. Web. 27 Mar 2010. <<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/expo-67/search/slideSearch.php>>.

diminished a person's scale in contrast to that of the pavilion. Just approaching the building would have made one feel small and intimidated by the frightening overhanging mass of the concrete roof, not to mention the presence of an imposing bronze monument with a mortifying image of a struggling man engraved into its faces ¹¹.

The contradictions in the USSR's pavilion and the communist ideologies the Union was intended to espouse were not limited to the exterior. Similar to most of the other pavilions, the one representing Soviet Union was very well organized inside. Unlike the rest, however, a different reasoning underlay the order. Its expositions were so homogeneous that the majority of the visitors could not sense that they were actually visiting a display of goods belonging to 16 Soviet republics, as opposed to a purely Russian exhibit ¹². The world's misconception in equating the USSR with the Russian republic is not difficult to comprehend; the Russian SFSR was the biggest in size among the original republics of the Soviet Union, with its most populated city, Moscow, automatically becoming a strategic and political center of the Union. This kept much of the major decision-making on Russian territory; the Russian SFSR was also the initiator of the unification project led by Lenin, a patriotic member of Russian society. As such, it is not so surprising that people often saw the

¹¹ Figure 3. "Bronze Statue." *Expo 67-USSR PAVILION*. Web. 29 Mar 2010.
<http://expo67.ncf.ca/expo_ussr_p4.html>.

¹² Figure 4. "USSR Main Floor." *Expo '67 Slide Collection*. Web. 29 Mar 2010.
<<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/expo-67/search/slideSearch.php>>.

USSR as 'Russian'. What is not so easily justified, however, is the fact that the USSR leadership seemingly never intended to correct this common misconception, a fact at odds with its mottos of egalitarianism and cooperation ¹³. As a person who lived in the USSR, Radoslav Zuk, a professor at the McGill School of Architecture, admitted realizing that: "like in a large melting pot, the communist Party, responsible for the preparation of the expositional themes, made sure to erase the slightest impression of the Soviet republics representing themselves solely at the pavilion". In his opinion, the Soviet government was trying to create a strong positive impression on visitors to the Expo, and possibly, the idea of the Union being so strongly associated with the largest country in the world, Russia, was supposed to help in providing the USSR with that image. In support of the notion that the USSR placed most of its emphasis on projecting a positive image of itself, Mr Zuk remembers getting the impression that the interior expositions of the pavilion were designed in a way intended to conceal much truthful information unfavorable to the Soviets' name, including the lack of any observable signs reflecting the political and social tension taking place, partly responsible for yet another change in the Secretariat of the Union ¹⁴. Of course, however, this emphasis on projecting an image of one harmonious unit spearheaded by the weighty Russian republic resulted in a grave under-representation of the efforts of the remaining republics on whom much of the

¹³ Kazakova, Olga. "Dissertation." НИИТАГ. Available from <http://www.niitag.ru/info/doc/?242>. Internet; accessed 24 March 2010.

¹⁴ Radoslav Zuk (Professor at the McGill School of Architecture, Montreal), interview by Kateryna Rogynska, March 17, 2010.

pavilion was dependent, its lack of forthright honesty again perhaps a sign of an underlying insecurity.

The under-representation of the constituent republics of the USSR was not limited to the interior of the pavilion. In pursuit of its aims, the Union helped itself to as much of the natural resources of its smaller 15 republics as possible, without worrying much about giving the republics their fair due. For instance, the simple erection of the planned pavilion at the Expo 67 would have not been possible if not for the advanced iron ore and steel production in a number of Ukrainian industrial cities, like Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk ¹⁵. These cities had provided up to 65% of the Union's gross steel supplies into the Soviet's market. Another evident resource shipped specifically for the Expo's pavilion by Ukraine was sheet glass. Southern sandy territories of the country transported over 40-50% of the total USSR glass supplies to the adjacent communist republics, providing the "mighty motherland" with the highest quality two-sided finished glass ¹⁶. While all this was impressing people at the Expo under the veneer of a great Russian-dominated Republic, the remaining Soviet republics got little credit or direct benefit. The influence of smaller federations, including both Ukrainian and others, on the USSR's pavilion was evident not only in the materials used for its construction, but also at the very heart of its most prized possession in the exposition. Inside the exhibition halls were located

¹⁵ "Donetsk." Encyclopedia Britannica. Available from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/169093/Donetsk> , Internet; accessed 25 March 2010.

¹⁶ Development of glass production in the Ukrainian SSR." *Glass and Chemicals* 0361-7610, no. 15 (1958): 91-95, 92.

the exemplars of the latest space exploration apparatus, one of the USSR's crown jewels. Unbeknownst to many however, and certainly not emphasized in any way in the pavilion, this apparatus was produced in a major Ukrainian industrial city, Dnipropetrovsk ¹⁷. This city had been making a major impact on the development of aerospace construction since the beginning of the 20th century. More than 250,000 people worked in the aerospace industry in Ukraine, producing everything from rockets to satellites and enhancing the Soviet Union's superiority in the field. "The Ukrainian team provided rockets and space stations for all the 360 Soviet space launches", said Volodymyr Horbulin, chief of the Ukrainian Space Agency and the head of the star of the space program, the South Machine-Building Factory in Dnipropetrovsk, proudly.

Radoslav Zuk mentions that this asymmetrical assimilation of joint efforts into a whole presented as purely 'Russian' was apparent not only in the industrial domain of the Union but also in the cultural and social domains. Talented artists, poets, architects and musicians were actively pursued by the USSR police and often accused of resistance against the forced use of a single legal language in their work-Russian ¹⁸. Despite the fact that these people lived behind the Iron Wall, their prominent artistic masterpieces became famous in the furthest corners of the world, and many of them were in fact chosen to represent the rich culture of the Soviet

¹⁷ Mycio, Mary. "Rocketry. Ukraine Aerospace Industry Needs Only Some Customers" *Los Angeles Times* (1992), http://articles.latimes.com/1992-04-24/news/mn-1079_1_soviet-union. (accessed March 25, 2010).

¹⁸ Graham, Loren R.. *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 79

Union at Expo 67 in Montreal. Dismissing the fact that the name tags of the artists were simply omitted from the exposition, many of the represented works, like Ukrainian painted pottery and its Pysanky eggs (made in a small Ukrainian town called Petrykivka) had a great impact on the development and spreading of the popularity of this particular art both within and outside the borders of the USSR. The hand-drawn masterpieces have become examples of the highest quality royal handicraft, known and appreciated worldwide.

Clearly, the struggles with its identity had ramifications for the USSR both at home and abroad. In part due to members of communist society resisting what were perceived as unfair practices such as those described above, the Soviet entity experienced increasing political turbulence within ¹⁹. It is likely that the duality of opposing elements in the structure of the USSR pavilion, like the well-defined “top” and “bottom”, as well as its race against the US to take the highest step on the “pedestal” of the world’s superiority, relate strongly to the political and social uncertainties of the Soviet Union in the period of 1960s ²⁰. Justifying the confusion the state found itself in, and not knowing whether to introduce more reforms or to revert the system back to past ideologies, the enormous, unjustified suspended mass of the roofing, that served as the major design element of the pavilion, seemed akin to an eye-catching trick that distracted viewers into focusing on the capabilities

¹⁹ Shannon, William. "The sinister tyranny of U.S.S.R.." *Lakeland Ledger*. Mar 7, 1986, 14.

²⁰ Sharlet, Robert. "Dissent and Repression in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe: Changing Patterns since Khrushchev" *International Journal* 33. 4 (1968), 763-795, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40201689>. (accessed March 27, 2010), 766.

of the Union, whilst giving the Communist Party some time while itself struggling to understand which direction to take in its legislation²¹. This 'image consciousness' of the Communist Party was exemplified in its construction of such an imposing pavilion, but produced by a supposedly "modest" Union, it ironically makes one think that the Union attempted to overcompensate for its inability to reach its stated goals. Just as the Soviet pavilion was trying to outdo its biggest competitor in its exterior structure, even while it faced such struggles at home, the exhibition halls displayed inside were overwhelmingly and excessively diverse in the types of products on show. In Mr Covo's opinion, the Soviet building was far too oriented on the World Fair, trying to exhibit as many of its treasures as possible, rather than selecting and showing off the best cultural and technological advances of the Union²². For example, as Mr Zuk remembers, a number of unimpressive and out-of-place exhibits, such as those showing off Soviet-produced refrigerators or fans were showcased to the public, along with many other ordinary products available in practically all of the countries participating in the Expo 67. It seemed as though, by over-cluttering the pavilion with products, the organizers of the Soviet exhibition were trying to make up for any possible negative impression the international visitors might have gotten about the Republic's society, all the while not noticing how this act could have been ironically misinterpreted as a simple fear of not

²¹Sharlet, Robert. "Dissent and Repression in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe: Changing Patterns since Khrushchev" *International Journal* 33. 4 (1968), 763-795, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40201689>. (accessed March 27, 2010), 7.

²² Figure 4. "USSR Main Floor." *Expo'67 Slide Collection*. Web. 29 Mar 2010. <<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/expo-67/search/slideSearch.php>>.

impressing the public enough.

Continuing the pursuit of impressing visitors, Mikhail Posokhin used unjustifiably expensive materials for the pavilion's structure. An enormous amount of glazing was shipped from the Ukraine specifically for the cladding purposes, an amount that would have been enough to use for the glazing of a number of multi-story buildings for Soviet families, along with huge masses of reinforced concrete and metal serving as the core of the building. To reinforce the notions of "massiveness" and excess in the Soviet Expo entry, a large bronze monument was made to guard the entrance to the pavilion. While not carrying any design significance, and as such, perhaps another excess in and of itself, the Hammer and Sickle of the USSR "welcoming people" carried the statement "everything for the sake of man, everything for the benefit of man", a value standing in striking contradiction to the extravagance of the pavilion itself ²³.

Continuing a similar trend of not always going along with its ideologies and many times taking very contradictory decisions in its legislation during the next decades brought the USSR to collapsing in 1991 and introduced yet another drastic change in the political map of the world ²⁴. By designing a building that seems almost suspended in the air, like a rocket frozen in its take off position, Mikhail Posokhin unintentionally gave the world a real truth about current political and

²³ Figure 5. "The Statue." *Expo 67-USSR PAVILION*. Web. 29 Mar 2010.
<http://expo67.ncf.ca/expo_ussr_p3.html>.

²⁴ Kenez, Peter. *A history of the Soviet Union from the beginning to the end*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

social situation in the USSR. Just like the ‘frozen rocket’, the USSR represented a grand project that never really got off the ground and lifted off. Furthermore, the use of v-shaped piers for the structural support sent a subtle message to foreign viewers that the Soviet Union, undergoing the latest in a string of turbulent Secretary replacements, was balancing on the verge of disaster, attempting to reach lofty goals but just as likely to fall due to its weakened political stability and the frustration of the society’s spirit ²⁵. While undergoing significant changes and substitutions in its Party order, the Soviet Union had to improvise significantly to keep its nation from rioting and protesting. Thus a series of mottos, anthems and up-lifting poems were repeatedly introduced to the public during its work hours, and leisure time. Mottos like “everything for the sake of man, everything for the benefit of man” were repeated throughout the stormy times in an effort to keep morale and halt dissent, and the most popular slogans were even represented to the Western world at the Expo 67. The combination of an up-lifting phrase with a figure of a strong comrade, engraved into the bronze monument, were supposed to embody the undying spirit of the Soviet society.

Sadly enough, the portrait of the worker, potentially supposed to emphasize how much power and control the Soviet proletariat had over its government at the time, only created more irony and confusion on the side of critics and visitors. It is difficult to imagine that the Union’s stormy history and turbulent leaderships would have turned that man into anything other than a scared,

²⁵ Francisco, Ronald A.. *The Dynamics of Protest and Repression in Dictatorships and Democratic Transitions*. New York: Springer New York, 2009, 34.

repressed, tired human being. An example is the way in which the Union treated its prominent scientists, such as Valentin Glushko, a Ukrainian who was one of the three principal Soviet “Chief Designers” of spacecraft and rocket technologies during the Soviet/American Space Race, and Sergey Korolyov, another Ukrainian considered to be one of the founding fathers of practical astronautics. Both of these outstanding men, along with hundreds of other eminent scientists, artist and poets, who kept the Union standing on its feet and even furthered its image in the world, were ruthlessly sent into detention in Soviet prison camps, deprived of their mother-tongues and forced to speak Russian, and dishonored by having their funds cut off in order to make them work continually harder, until their physical capabilities simply couldn’t handle the pressure any longer ²⁶. Both in its extravagant spending and in the truth of the workers’ lives that lay behind the glamorous and pristine exterior of the pavilion, the USSR painted a disingenuous picture intended to distract attention from the serious problems it was facing, but a closer investigation of the pavilion helps reveal some remaining marks of the reality.

It is fitting that architecture thus became yet another tool for the Communist Party to manipulate in the way it assumed was most favorable ²⁷. After decades of trying to shape the world, or at least a sizable part of it, to fit into its own outlook, the constant internal and external political pressures and competition, and

²⁶ Graham, Loren R.. *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 122.

²⁷ Kazakova, Olga. "Dissertation." НИИТАГ. Available from <http://www.niitag.ru/info/doc/?242>. Internet; accessed 24 March 2010.

particularly its desperation to present a powerful and united image to the world made the Soviet Union lose track of the very mottos and values it was created to espouse. Looking closely at the USSR's pavilion at the Expo 67, one can see, much as they may have been willfully concealed, many of the warning signs and cracks that may ultimately have played a large role in the Union's eventual dissolution.

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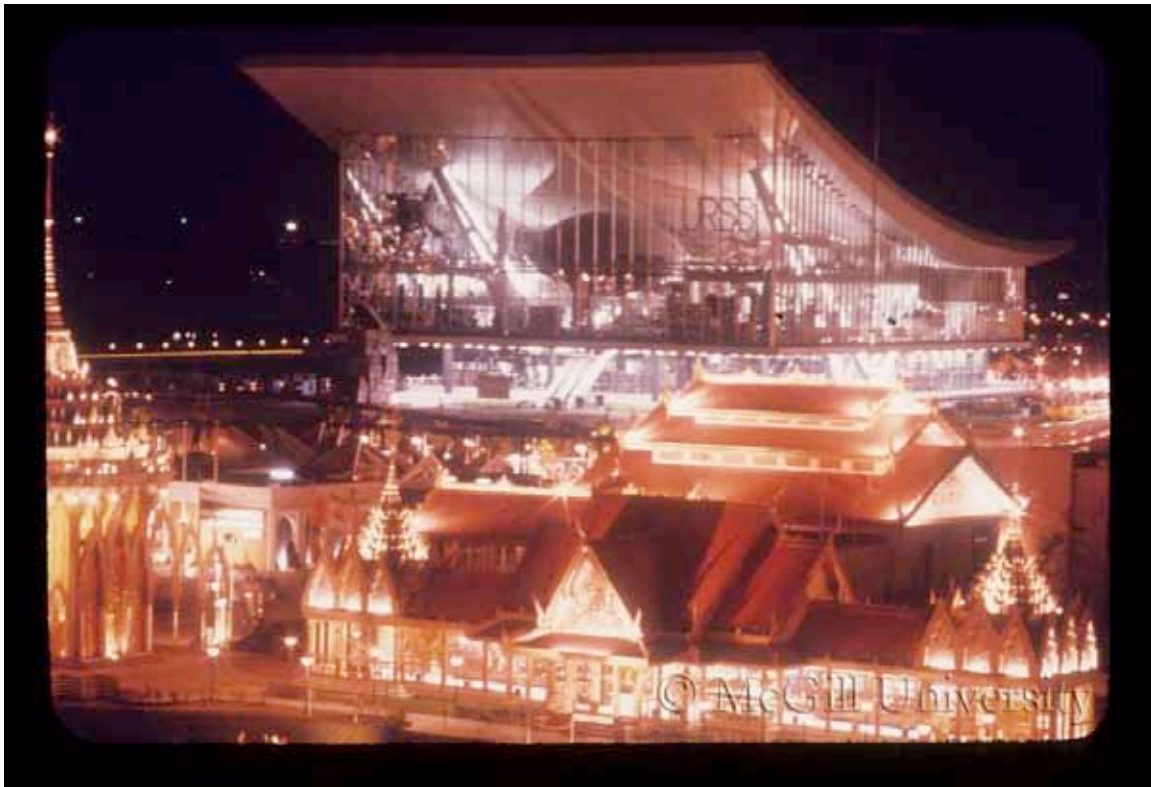
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Appendix

Figure 1. The USSR Pavilion Shining its Glory at Night.



"Thailand & USSR Pavilions at Night." *Expo'67 Slide Collection*.
Web. 27 Mar 2010. <<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/expo-67/search/slideSearch.php>>.

Figure 2. USSR vs. US Pavilions



"USSR & USA Pavilions." *Expo'67 Slide Collection*. Web. 27 Mar 2010. <<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/expo-67/search/slideSearch.php>>.

Figure 3. Bronze Monument Guarding the Entrance to the USSR Pavilion at Expo 67.



"Bronze Statue." *Expo 67-USSR PAVILION*. Web. 29 Mar 2010.
<http://expo67.ncf.ca/expo_ussr_p4.html>.

Figure 4. USSR Main Exhibition Floor.



"USSR Main Floor." *Expo'67 Slide Collection*. Web. 29 Mar 2010.
<<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/expo-67/search/slideSearch.php>>.

Figure 5. The Struggling Communist Proletariat.



"The Statue." *Expo 67-USSR PAVILION*. Web. 29 Mar 2010.
<http://expo67.ncf.ca/expo_ussr_p3.html>.